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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fifty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 545th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 3 October 2000, at 10 a.m.

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| Chairman: | Mr. KHORRAM | (Islamic Republic of Iran) |
| later: | Mr. MOLANDER (Vice-Chairman) | (Sweden) |
| later: | Mr. KHORRAM | (Islamic Republic of Iran) |

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GE.00-03167 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

ANNUAL THEME: UNHCR@50 : FROM RESPONSE TO SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (continued) (A/AC.96/938)

1. Mr. NEGROTTO CAMBIASO (Italy) said that Italy supported the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union and congratulated the High Commissioner, Mrs. Ogata, whose wise guidance had enabled UNHCR to help millions of refugees to return home. It was aware that resolving a humanitarian crisis required more than the cessation of hostilities and the return of displaced persons, and was firmly committed to reconstruction projects, inter alia, in the Balkans and Somalia. The transition phase between emergency assistance and development required concerted efforts by all the actors involved and, above all, an effective contribution by regional organizations.

2. With regard to international protection, Italy firmly supported the process of global consultations that the High Commissioner had recently launched to promote the effective implementation of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, which were the foundation of the international refugee regime. As for the pressing financial problems mentioned by the High Commissioner, Italy would soon be in a position to review its financial support to UNHCR for emergency response. Lastly, he deplored the recent tragic events in West Timor and Guinea and assured the High Commissioner of his Government's determination to help the international community guarantee the security of humanitarian personnel.

3. Mrs. KUNADI (India) paid tribute to Mrs. Ogata, whose work at the head of UNHCR had been marked by outstanding achievements in the face of especially trying circumstances. In that respect, the recent killing of UNHCR officials was a brutal reminder of the grave risks faced by dedicated humanitarian officials. In her Government's view, their protection was the responsibility of the States in which they operated. If necessary, assistance should be provided to countries which needed it in order to strengthen their security forces.

4. With regard to the theme for the current session, the document prepared by the secretariat (A/AC.96/938) was highly interesting in that it posed a fundamental question, namely, why the refugee problem, which had been regarded in UNHCR's earlier days of activity as temporary and regional, had become constant and worldwide. Her Government felt that two factors had contributed to the situation: on the one hand, poverty and the many consequent conflicts and, on the other, flagrant disregard of the values of tolerance and pluralism. Those were the factors that had led to the grave refugee crisis suffered by India and referred to in paragraph 10 of document A/AC.96/938. In that regard, her delegation stressed that the crisis had not been caused by the conflict between India and a neighbouring country; for the sake of historical truth, it should be noted that the refugees had fled to India because of atrocities committed against them by their own Government, well before the December 1971 conflict.

5. On the subject of solutions, her delegation welcomed the secretariat's proposal that the developing countries' capacity to readmit their citizens should be enhanced by encouraging development initiatives and linking humanitarian assistance to longer-term development. All the

evidence showed that prevention and peace-building were the international community's most fruitful approach, particularly in the developing countries. Her Government would like to see more focus on that aspect in future. But it was important for UNHCR to keep to its humanitarian mandate and avoid involvement in problems of an essentially political nature.

6. It had to be recognized that it was predominantly the developing countries that constituted countries of origin and as well as of asylum. Several of them had fulfilled their responsibilities admirably, often putting their environment, economy and social fabric at risk. On the other hand, countries having the means as well as the duty to provide asylum and protection pursued restrictive policies such as expulsion and premature returns to countries that were still unsafe. Her Government, for its part, had taken in large numbers of refugees, whose hosting it financed entirely from its own resources. However, it did not share the view that the way to solve conflict crises was for States to accede to various conventions and protocols. India was not a signatory to the 1951 Convention because the Convention did not address the many problems caused by massive refugee flows. Lastly, she called on the international community to carry on the age-old humanitarian tradition of providing assistance and succour to people in distress.

7. Mr. KHATIB (United Republic of Tanzania) expressed his delegation's deepest sorrow at the recent murders of UNHCR officials. He congratulated the secretariat on the quality of the document dealing with the annual theme (A/AC.96/938) and fully supported the ideas expressed therein. It had to be said that, 50 years after the creation of UNHCR, the international community had not yet managed to eradicate the root causes of population displacements. Environmental degradation and deteriorating security in host countries made the latter reluctant to open their borders to refugee masses fleeing conflict and ethnic tension. Nevertheless, the United Republic of Tanzania, true to its tradition of hospitality, continued to receive refugees despite limited international assistance. In that regard, the local population in reception areas needed assistance in order to strengthen the institution of asylum, thus ensuring refugee protection. For that reason, his Government welcomed UNHCR's decision to hold consultations among all stakeholders with a view to revitalizing the protection regime.

8. The traditional solutions to refugee problems - voluntary return, local integration and resettlement in third countries - remained entirely valid; even so, the international community should create sustainable development programmes in countries of origin as a way of ensuring that return was permanent. Those countries, for their part, should put an end to hostilities and thus create a favourable climate for the return of their nationals. In that regard, he called on the international community to give its support to Mr. Mandela, the mediator in the Burundi peace process, since, once peace had returned to that country, the problem of refugees in the Great Lakes region would be partly resolved.

9. Sadly, double standards seemed to be applied in the provision of resources for the maintenance of refugees in various parts of the world. The quality and quantity of resources made available in certain regions were nothing compared to those received in others, although the problems of all were equally grave. In conclusion, he expressed gratitude to Mrs. Ogata for her tireless efforts on behalf of refugees in the United Republic of Tanzania and elsewhere.

10. Mr. RUDDOCK (Australia) said that, true to its tradition of hospitality and mindful of the contribution of refugees to its development, his country was more than ever resolved to fulfil its obligations under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. The international protection regime was currently affected by a multitude of problems (globalization, disparity in economic and social development levels, the changing nature of conflicts, terrorism, traffic in persons and so on) and was at a crossroads. Although requirements were constantly growing, the resources available to meet them were inadequate. On that subject, Western countries were spending $10 billion each year on determining refugee status for half a million asylum-seekers, of whom only a small percentage were refugees. One tenth of that amount could easily suffice to double the UNHCR budget; the resources thus released would be used to assist countries which agreed to receive refugees despite their often limited economic means and the low tolerance of their environment. At the same time, the international community ought to combat the many forms of smuggling that directly threatened the refugee protection system.

11. The Office of the High Commissioner needed clear guidelines from States. In its current format, the Executive Committee was too unwieldy for frank debate and problem-solving. Australia therefore urged support for new mechanisms and structures. The members of the Executive committee should have the courage to exploit the diversity of views rather than dwell unduly on the difficulties of consensus-building. The consultations proposed by UNHCR would provide an opportunity to adopt the bold and ambitious reforms necessary if a fairer, more effective protection system was to be achieved.

12. Mr. HEINEMANN (Netherlands) said that his delegation fully associated itself with the statement made by the representative of France on behalf of the European Union. The 1951 Convention continued to be of paramount importance and the principles of that universal instrument should be the basis of any new approach to refugee protection. His Government was in favour of organizing world consultations in which all topics would be raised, including illegal and economic migration, trafficking in human beings and the plight of displaced persons. Disparities in economic development, civil strife and inter-ethnic conflicts were currently creating massive displacements of people and a distinction should be made between genuine asylum-seekers and those migrating for other reasons. The abuse of asylum procedures posed a very heavy burden on transit and host countries, making Governments and peoples ill disposed to welcome refugees to their country or neighbourhood.

13. Refugee protection, UNHCR's prime mandate, should continue to be its main focus of activity. In order to carry out that mission, UNHCR needed adequate financial resources. The Netherlands, for its part, would staunchly provide financial and all other forms of support for UNHCR's tasks. Other humanitarian actors should contribute in a spirit of coordination and cooperation, avoiding fruitless bickering. In conclusion, he paid tribute to Mrs. Ogata for her devotion to the cause of millions of refugees and displaced persons around the world.

14. Mr. TSAÏ (Canada) expressed his country's indignation at the killing of UNHCR officials in West Timor and Guinea; his Government felt that the perpetrators of such deeds should be brought up before the courts. Canada supported UNHCR and collaborated with it in seeking the best possible solutions to the complex problems faced by refugees and displaced persons; it responded readily to the appeal launched by the High Commissioner for global consultations to revitalize the refugee protection system.

15. Numerous conflicts, more or less throughout the world, had caused huge population movements, making any programme of repatriation, integration or resettlement impossible. Because of globalization, several countries had had to take in a growing number of asylum-seekers and were faced with the hard task of distinguishing genuine refugees from illegal migrants. In addition, criminal groups were organizing large-scale displacements of persons to countries such as Canada, which had therefore enacted new legislation aimed at preventing criminals from abusing the procedure for determining refugee status, while increasing opportunities for asylum-seekers. Strategies should be drawn up, in partnership with UNHCR and all States involved, with a view to strengthening the institution of asylum, improving the links between humanitarian assistance and development and promoting peace.

16. To provide assistance and protection was not enough; it was up to the international community to make a political commitment to combat the root causes of refugee crises. For its part, UNHCR should bear in mind the need for accountability to donors, member States and refugees. It should adopt more transparency in defining priorities for resource earmarking and budgeting. The programme and budget should reflect a better balance between protection, care and assistance. Canada also hoped that a policy of sex equality would be coherently applied and maintained throughout the range of UNHCR programmes and in its human resources management.

17. Mr. WEISS (Austria) welcomed UNHCR's arrangements for global consultations to strengthen the refugee protection regime. The Hungarian crisis in 1956 and the resultant swift and massive exodus of 200,000 refugees, mainly into Austria, had been the first major crisis UNHCR had had to face and the first example of partnership with other key actors such as ICRC, the Austrian Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations. Over 50 years, 1 million persons had sought and found refuge on Austrian soil. Former refugees and their descendants currently accounted for some 10 per cent of the population and made a valuable contribution to Austrian society. In addition, roughly 1 per cent of Austria's current population consisted of former refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the past year, Austria had also participated in the humanitarian evacuation programme in Kosovo.

18. On behalf of the Chairperson in office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), he said that the cooperation between that organization and the United Nations system was an excellent example of the implementation of the provisions of Chapter VIII of the Charter. One of the priorities of the Austrian presidency had been to lay the foundation of a global strategy for migration management, involving various participants, including UNHCR. Collaboration in the field with UNHCR, IOM and the Council of Europe had developed, over the years, into a strategic partnership. The Austrian presidency had extended the scope of that cooperation in the context of the regional CIS Conference process to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighbouring States.

19. Ms. KLINGVALL (Sweden) welcomed the consultations which were to be held with a view to revitalizing the international refugee protection system and which should also strengthen the institution of asylum. The point of departure should be the full application of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. The refugee definition in the Convention should be

so interpreted as to include persons persecuted by non-State agents; areas not covered by the Convention should also be addressed. The right to asylum and the principle of non-refoulement in particular should not be challenged. In that context, her Government attached great importance to continued dialogue between UNHCR and the European Union on migration, asylum and refugee assistance.

20. Since mass forced displacement was no longer an exception, a comprehensive, coherent response was required to humanitarian problems. Particular emphasis should be placed on women and children in building peace. With regard to conflict prevention, a priority in Sweden's foreign policy, UNHCR could contribute to preventing human suffering, protecting humanitarian assistance activities and influencing parties to conflicts not to violate international humanitarian law. Insecurity was the plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons, even once they were away from the scene of conflict, and it was important to reaffirm the responsibility of States to uphold the security of refugee camps.

21. During its presidency of the European Union in 2001, Sweden would give priority to child victims of violent conflicts and population displacement. In March, it would host a conference on that theme. Her delegation congratulated the High Commissioner for having established a refugee educational trust, the education of refugee children being essential.

22. She emphasized that UNHCR needed to have sufficient resources. It was up to all donors, of whatever category, to ensure that the budget approved by the Executive Committee was appropriately funded.

23. Mr. DEMBRI (Algeria) said that the document on the annual theme (A/AC.96/938) showed what major issues still had to be faced with regard to strategies for humanitarian action in order to meet the unforeseen challenges of a multidimensional humanitarian crisis which, in many respects, went beyond the terms of UNHCR's mandate. Questions of law were doubtless paramount in that regard and applicable to all phases of the process of solving problems of refugees, displaced persons and returnees, but they must not fail to take account of or obscure the objective causes of the phenomenon of exile. Because of the destabilization caused by regional crises, host and transit countries, mostly countries of the South, had less and less room for manoeuvre as flows of refugees and displaced persons increased. Development assistance measures were essential and should be strengthened and sustained if the causes of population exodus and displacement were to be removed and the post-conflict situation of countries stabilized.

24. His delegation believed that international action must be guided by moral principles based on solidarity and burden-sharing. It supported the establishment of partnership arrangements between UNHCR and various humanitarian actors for joint action to deal with emergencies - a prerequisite for preventing the intervention of non-humanitarian actors. From its experience as a host country, Algeria believed that Africa was a striking example of the world's humanitarian crises and of the "humanitarian fatigue" syndrome arising from the never-ending phenomenon of refugees and displaced persons. In order to deal with the problems faced, it proposed a drive to promote peace and security, combat the arms trade, seek and consolidate regional and international partnerships for humanitarian assistance, maintain and expand aid

programmes with better targeted action and measures more appropriate to development in the region concerned and strengthen national capacity to deal with the many challenges of socio-economic development and democratization.

25. In collaboration with the Governments of the countries of origin and relevant United Nations institutions, Algeria had been able to contribute to the voluntary return of refugees from Mali and Niger in 1998. It was also providing assistance to Sahrawi refugees and believed that the self-determination of the Sahrawi people continued to be a fundamental cause which called, now more than ever, for the mobilization and help of the entire international community. Algeria would work unceasingly to further the just cause of the voluntary repatriation of Sahrawi refugees and remind United Nations bodies of their responsibilities in that regard.

26. Mr. SUNGAR (Turkey) said that the term of office of Mrs. Ogata, to whom he paid tribute, had been marked by some outstanding achievements. The problems of refugees, displaced persons, irregular immigration and asylum-seekers nevertheless called for the strengthening of the international protection system. He therefore welcomed UNHCR's proposal for global consultations with a view to reaffirming the centrality of the 1951 Convention. The implementation of the humanitarian principles underlying the protection system should be spelled out and the term "refugee" more clearly defined. It was of the utmost importance to distinguish genuine refugees from economic migrants. And it was essential, in order to prevent abuses of asylum procedures, to lay down principles and rules for an effective exclusion mechanism which would further enhance the international protection system. Responsibility-sharing was also a question deserving special attention. The international community must find ways of helping countries, particularly developing countries, to deal with the problems of hosting refugees.

27. In his delegation's view, only an objective approach to the legitimate concerns of all parties involved in population displacement issues could guarantee progress towards an international protection system. Humanitarian action alone could not solve fundamental social, economic and political problems that could lead to population displacements. The international community must intensify its efforts to prevent and settle conflicts, as well as build peace, while upholding and protecting human rights.

28. Mr. BRYLLE (Denmark) reaffirmed the importance his country attached to the work of UNHCR, which played a unique, indispensable role not only in the United Nations system, but in the humanitarian field in general. The number of people in need of UNHCR's protection and assistance was constantly increasing and the parties to violent conflicts were tending more and more to flout humanitarian principles, without regard for the lives of humanitarian workers, who should therefore be provided with the necessary legal protection.

29. The growth in the number of asylum-seekers and migrants from developing countries was indeed liable to result in the adoption of more restrictive measures. In the field of humanitarian assistance, UNHCR's experience, especially in Kosovo, underlined the need to strengthen response and coordination capacity to deal with complex emergencies. His delegation supported the important work being done in that regard, and welcomed UNHCR's collaboration with other organizations in favour of displaced persons. In its view, UNHCR had an extremely

important role to play, not only in protecting people, but also in conflict prevention and peace-building. For reasons of efficiency and budgetary restrictions, UNHCR should refocus its action on its core mandate, involve other actors in carrying out its tasks and make better use of local resources.

30. His country would continue to be a major donor to UNHCR, but stressed the need for a more equitable and stable basis for its financing. UNHCR also cooperated closely with Danish non-governmental organizations, particularly the Danish Refugee Council. Denmark itself had accepted a large number of refugees, including a quota under resettlement programmes.

31. Since UNHCR would have a highly important future role, his delegation was pleased that it would hold global consultations in order to strengthen the international protection system on the basis of the 1951 Convention.

32. Mr. BUTIIME (Uganda) said that the international community's response to mass refugee flows caused by violent conflicts had not been the same for all regions and the African continent had received the least. He thanked Mrs. Ogata for her tireless efforts to ensure that the plight of African refugees remained a priority. All refugees should receive equitable assistance regardless of nationality, race and geographical, military or political importance. An equitable response to refugee problems was essential not only for strategic reasons deriving from security and political, economic and environmental problems, but also on humanitarian grounds stemming from the obligation to assist refugees and protect their rights, coupled with measures to deal with "impunity". In the Great Lakes region, the refugee problem could not be separated from the larger issues. Uganda was therefore fully committed to the implementation of the Lusaka Accords, which could pave the way for a durable solution to refugee problems and provide peace and security for all countries in the region.

33. His delegation believed that voluntary repatriation was the best solution, followed by local integration of refugees. For that reason, his Government, while encouraging the self-sufficiency of refugees, also addressed the development needs of the local host communities. It was therefore unfortunate that UNHCR had substantially reduced its funding of the Ugandan programme, for that would have a definite negative impact on the refugee situation.

34. It should be borne in mind that the developing countries, especially the least developed, had made enormous efforts, but could no longer cope with refugee problems. Uganda, for example, had even made land available for refugees to cultivate, but, if international support was lacking, all such efforts were liable to be to no avail. His delegation endorsed the objectives announced by the High Commissioner, but stressed that, if they were to succeed, UNHCR must have sufficient resources and a well-motivated staff. In that regard, member States had a duty to ensure the security of humanitarian workers.

35. Mr. JOHANSEN (Norway) said that most of the humanitarian emergencies during Mrs. Ogata's term of office had been caused by internal conflict and complicated by a lack of access or security. UNHCR was more essential than ever and the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees must remain the cornerstone of international refugee protection. Since most current population movements took place within national

borders, however, means for better protection of displaced persons must be found and effective measures provided against human trafficking and other forms of persecution. Global consultations, which UNHCR intended to conduct and would provide an opportunity to address all such issues, must lead to a further strengthening of the international protection system.

36. Humanitarian assistance must be accompanied by political and confidence-building measures; it must be founded on impartiality and humanitarian workers should have fully secured access to those in need - a condition far from being respected. The United Nations system and the Government of Member States must adopt measures to strengthen security and protect humanitarian workers. UNHCR's experience in Kosovo had illustrated the need for improved preparedness for emergencies; his delegation was ready to contribute to the programme prepared for that purpose.

37. Mr. GERBER (Switzerland) expressed his revulsion at the brutal murder of four UNHCR workers and called on the international community to provide further means to guarantee the security of humanitarian personnel. He reiterated that refugee protection remained UNHCR's core mandate and that the 1951 Convention would continue to be the best framework for that purpose. Nevertheless, the sizeable flows of opportunist migrants which tended to abuse refugee status made it essential to draw up a satisfactory definition of persons in need of protection. Switzerland therefore welcomed the global consultations to be undertaken by UNHCR with a view to strengthening the protection system and agreed with the "three circles" idea put forward at the meeting of the Standing Committee. It would support all initiatives taken by the High Commissioner, including, if so decided, the holding of an intergovernmental event to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Convention. Lastly, he fully supported the integrated strategy which had been announced at the recent Economic and Social Council meeting in New York and which linked humanitarian action, development and prevention. Switzerland welcomed the action taken by UNHCR to promote post-conflict reconstruction and would renew its contribution to the Office in 2001.

38. Mrs. VALLE PEREIRA (Brazil) paid tribute to the competence of Mrs. Ogata and assured her of the importance the Brazilian Government attached to the appointment of a worthy successor. The Brazilian Government roundly condemned the killing and kidnapping of UNHCR workers in West Timor and Guinea and called on all Governments to spare no effort to ensure the protection of humanitarian personnel, including ratifying, as Brazil had done during the Millennium General Assembly, the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel.

39. During the 50 years of its existence, UNHCR had made a decisive contribution to peace and stability. It should pursue its activities, even though the environment in which it worked had become increasingly complex. The nature of conflicts had changed, creating new flows of refugees and asylum-seekers hard to distinguish from ordinary migrants, and the number of contributors to refugee assistance had multiplied. There were nevertheless some encouraging signs. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor had been playing a remarkable role in building an institutional framework so that East Timor could accede to independence within the scheduled time-frame. In South America, the picture was generally favourable. In Brazil itself, the Government and UNHCR had been strengthening an already

solid partnership and, during its current presidency of the Common Market of the Southern Cone, the Government had initiated negotiations aimed at harmonizing national legislations with regard to refugee assistance.

40. Mr. BURUSAPATANA (Thailand), paying tribute to the UNHCR officials who had lost their lives in West Timor and Guinea, recalled that his country was hosting over 100,000 refugees from Myanmar on its territory, in 10 temporary shelters protected from any armed intrusion and receiving assistance from a number of Thai and international non-governmental organizations, as well as UNHCR assistance since 1998. Hosting the refugees had not been without cost to the country, which already had to cope with the presence of nearly 1 million illegal migrant workers from Myanmar. For over 15 years, those persons had been living in supposedly temporary shelter and it was more than time for the international community, represented by UNHCR, to help them to return to their country in safety and with dignity. On behalf of Thailand, he called on UNHCR to establish a dialogue as speedily as possible with the Myanmar authorities so as to prevent further refugee flows and organize the return of those already beyond its borders. In addition to the 100,000 refugees, over 2,000 students from Myanmar had been residing at the Maneeloy Student Centre for nearly a decade. He expressed his appreciation to certain countries which had offered to receive some of them and provide them with proper training and hoped that other countries would do likewise so as to share the international burden more evenly. The year 2000 marked not only the fiftieth anniversary of UNHCR, but also the twenty-fifth anniversary of cooperation between it and Thailand, an event which would be commemorated by the organization of a round table of eminent persons in Bangkok in November 2000.

40 bis. Mr. Molander (Sweden), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

41. Mr. Man Soon CHANG (Republic of Korea) said that his Government supported UNHCR's readiness to reaffirm, on the one hand, the principles of the 1951 Convention as the universal foundation of the international refugee protection regime and, on the other, to seek new approaches, including the launching of global consultations, to deal with situations not covered by the Convention. Such consultations would have to take into account the complexity of current population flows and seek a balance between humanitarian considerations and host countries' concerns. His country, a new member of the Executive Committee, was ready to work closely with UNHCR and fully supported any concrete proposal to enhance the security of humanitarian personnel. He welcomed the Secretary-General's recommendation for the broadening of the scope of legal protection provided under the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, which his country had already ratified.

42. Mr. BEN SALEM (Tunisia) said he was struck by three constants of refugee problems: their universality, their permanence and their diversity. He urged UNHCR to strengthen its ties of cooperation with other bodies involved in safeguarding human rights and with non-governmental organizations campaigning against human rights violations - one of the main causes of refugee flows - as well as with countries everywhere, for refugee protection, since the task was so immense that it required world solidarity. He reiterated the Tunisian authorities' support for the Office's activity around the world and particularly in Africa, which depended greatly on international solidarity.

43. Mr. MAC AODHA (Ireland) said that his delegation shared the grave concern about the security risks faced by humanitarian workers. It had examined with interest the relevant proposals submitted in July 2000 and agreed that the document listing those proposals should be updated and re-examined. It also welcomed the High Commissioner's confirmation of the early resumption of the "Brookings Process" and the projects to evaluate its activities in Kosovo and other regions, as well as the proposed structural reforms.

44. Ireland recognized the budgetary problems faced by UNHCR. While supporting a realignment of priorities in budgetary planning, the Irish authorities would closely study the information provided by the High Commissioner about the lack of resources and hoped to be in a position to respond positively to the appeal, as it had done in 1999. Ireland's contribution to UNHCR had grown steadily over recent years and the Irish Prime Minister had recently announced to the General Assembly his country's firm commitment to reach the target of 0.7 per cent of GNP in its overseas development aid programme by the end of 2007. Ireland unconditionally supported UNHCR, particularly with regard to its long-term activities, in regions where problems persisted even though they might have slipped from media attention, including West Africa, southern Africa and the Great Lakes region, East Timor, where Ireland would shortly open a liaison office, Nepal and the former Yugoslavia. On the issue of protection for humanitarian personnel, he welcomed the recently launched global consultation process and the proposed consideration of the concentric circles model, on which he hoped to be able to provide a preliminary response at a later meeting. Lastly, he paid tribute to Mrs. Ogata for the commitment she had shown and her tenacious will to increase the world's awareness of the refugee problem.

45. The Reverend Father BLUME (Holy See) said that putting an end to the tragic situation of refugees and displaced persons required global action at the political, economic, military, legal and humanitarian levels. Such action must be based on a firm moral commitment since the challenge was not simply to guarantee the security of such persons, but to restore their dignity. In that sense, UNHCR's work was among the noblest that mankind had ever undertaken.

46. Countries were increasingly being prevented, however, from fulfilling their international refugee protection obligations; either they lacked the financial means or they had conflicting political or economic priorities, which at times led them to put a restrictive interpretation on international instruments or other relevant texts relating to refugees.

47. Efforts must be made in the next millennium to reverse that trend and put solidarity back in evidence. That objective should be pursued by measures such as reaffirming the principles of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, monitoring decisions relating to basic human rights and seeking of means to strengthen international cooperation on the issue of refugees who were still awaiting repatriation. A stronger moral commitment by political leadership should likewise be fostered by disseminating information on the plight of refugees in host and resettlement countries, through the media, schools and religious institutions.

48. Mr. RAMEL (Philippines) said that, for a durable solution to refugee problems, the international protection system must be strengthened and States should be encouraged to face up to their responsibilities in that regard by promoting respect for the 1951 Convention, taking in refugees on their territory or providing a financial contribution to the relevant programmes. An

effective partnership should be set up between government departments and various actors of civil society. The security of humanitarian personnel in areas where refugees were located should also be strengthened through improved inter-State cooperation and by providing host countries with sufficient funds. Humanitarian assistance should be linked to long-term development and a culture of peace should be fostered, an objective to which UNHCR could contribute through the performance of its core mandate.

49. For 50 years, UNHCR had been expanding its collaboration to strengthen its capacity for action and broaden the scope of the international protection system. In view of the current complexities, however, it needed to strengthen its emergency response capacity and modernize its management system, at headquarters and in the field.

50. Lastly, he congratulated Mrs. Ogata on her stewardship of the Office over the past 10 years and reiterated his country's commitment to the principles of the Convention and to the work of UNHCR.

51. Mr. CHOWDHURY (Bangladesh) said that UNHCR's sphere of action had grown in line with the emergence of new demands and the growing complexity of humanitarian crises. But the principles of refugee protection were being applied ever more restrictively in some countries, in some cases even with no justification. The developing countries, meanwhile, continued to bear the heaviest burden of hosting refugees. He therefore called on all States to show solidarity by contributing to the needs of refugees and host countries. In the same spirit, he appealed to the Government of Myanmar to speed up the return of its nationals, many of whom were still living in Bangladesh as refugees.

52. There were certain important principles providing that refugee action should aim to bring about voluntary repatriation, meet the needs of the most vulnerable sectors and prevent further movements of people by dealing with the social, economic, ethnic and political factors that caused them. Effective partnership among the various humanitarian actors was essential and UNHCR should be provided with adequate regular resources. Measures should be adopted to strengthen the security of humanitarian personnel.

53. Mr. KNOTHE (Poland) said that his delegation appreciated the judgement reflected in Mrs. Ogata's opening statement. The fiftieth anniversary of UNHCR was a time for reflection about the problems that still existed and also one for taking pride in UNHCR's accomplishments. He strongly condemned the killings carried out in West Timor and Guinea and called for enhanced security for humanitarian personnel. UNHCR could not fulfil its mandate without the partnership of all States, which had an obligation to accept refugees pursuant to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, whose ratification should be universal.

54. In order to implement the principles embodied in those instruments and European refugee law, Poland had enacted new legislation in that field and had set up an independent Refugee Board, where asylum-seekers could apply for a review of administrative decisions by an independent agency. A new alien's law should also be adopted shortly. In Poland, as elsewhere, the offices that considered asylum requests had an excessive workload because of the increase in requests from individuals who clearly had no valid claim to refugee status. The phenomenon

was damaging the operation of the international protection system, which had likewise been affected by new patterns of conflict, the unprecedented growth in internal displacement and the increase in human trafficking. The global consultations which UNHCR proposed to start would therefore come at just the right time.

55. Mr. BLOKHIN (Russian Federation) said that the complex nature of current crises and the scale of recent population movements showed that the refugee problem was a matter of national, regional and international security. To attack the problem at its source, however, States and international organizations must take concerted political, socio-economic and humanitarian action. UNHCR's proposed global approach and the importance it attached to prevention were therefore welcome.

56. The Russian Federation intended to assume its responsibilities with regard to refugees in its territory and had taken an active part in the efforts made by the international community and UNHCR in the country on behalf of human rights and refugees. It nevertheless needed continued international assistance in accordance with the principle of international solidarity provided for in the final document of the regional Conference, held in Geneva in 1996, to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighbouring States. In that regard, he welcomed the decision, taken at the fifth meeting of the Steering Group of that Conference, to extend the conference process by five years and was pleased that the decision had been broadly supported by the States concerned, international humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations.

57. As UNHCR had noted on several occasions, the Russian Federation was still in a very difficult situation and the assistance it received covered but a bare minimum of its needs. It therefore welcomed the decision for an inter-agency appeal for the Northern Caucasus in the first half of 2001 and thanked Mrs. Ogata for the assistance provided to the victims of anti-terrorist operations in the Republic of Chechnya. As a result of measures adopted by the authorities, the situation in the region should be returning to normal, thus paving the way for the return of refugees and enabling UNHCR to work in Chechnya itself.

58. In a more general sense, the task of resolving the problems of refugees and displaced persons should be part of a broader task of preventing crises and consolidating civil society. The process of consultation on international protection problems was therefore welcome. UNHCR should not, however, seek to broaden its mandate, but should continue as the "lead agency" in the field whenever a large-scale population movement occurred - a role for which its principles and methods of operation were designed. The UNHCR leadership should also continue the efforts being made to improve the Office's internal functioning and maintain its neutrality while continuing to observe the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign States.

59. Lastly, he deplored the proliferation of acts of premeditated violence against staff members of the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations in the exercise of their duties.

60. Mr. LEVY (Israel) said that the current session was a time to consider the plight of societies at times torn apart, but trying to live together and being helped by courageous individuals ready to risk their own lives to help their neighbours, as had unfortunately recently been seen in West Timor and Guinea.

61. He expressed his thanks to Mrs. Ogata, stressing the quality of her opening speech and the determination with which she had sought solutions to complex new problems.

62. The issue of refugees was of paramount concern to Israel, since they made up almost half its total population. The country had always had an outstanding tradition as a haven, as demonstrated in recent years by the arrival of over 1 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, as well as many refugees from Viet Nam, Kosovo, Bosnia, Albania and Chechnya.

63. In May 2000, Mrs. Ogata had paid a visit to Israel, something no previous High Commissioner for Refugees had done, and had met with senior officials and persons responsible for handling refugee issues. Since then, UNHCR's role had been better understood and appreciated by the people and the situation should be improved even further by the establishment of a national body to consider asylum requests, which should enhance the implementation in Israel of the principles of the 1951 Convention.

64. Israel had also taken in 6,000 persons from South Lebanon since its unilateral withdrawal from the region. Although not all of them were expected to remain in the country, they had all benefited from the administrative and material facilities ordinarily earmarked for persons having refugee status. Not content with receiving refugees in large numbers in the country, Israel contributed to assistance programmes around the world and made available its skills in the areas of infrastructure, medicine and agriculture.

65. Mr. Khorram (Islamic Republic of Iran) resumed the Chair.

66. Mr. QIAO Zonghuai (China) congratulated Mrs. Ogata on her comprehensive introductory statement and recalled that she had done an enormous amount of work on behalf of refugees. He associated himself with previous speakers' expressions of appreciation.

67. The time was ripe for UNHCR to review the nature of its mandate in the light of its 50 years of experience and to draw lessons from past successes. In view of the drastic changes currently taking place in the world and the spread of regional, ethnic and national conflicts, expectations of UNHCR were greater than ever, but, if it was to grow in effectiveness and importance, as was hoped, it must seek to strengthen its cooperation with Governments, adhere strictly to its Statute and comply with the instructions it received from the General Assembly. According to its Statute, it should intervene only with the approval of the Governments of the countries concerned, since States were first and foremost responsible for the situation of refugees. It must also ensure at all times that its activity was entirely non-political and related only to groups or categories of refugees.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.